

Magnifying the Lord
Luke 1:39-55
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I have a confession to make, and this day of all days seems like the perfect time to make it. I'm a present-shaker. Any other present shakers here with me this morning? It's OK, the first step to healing is admitting you have a problem. As a child, each December I would wait for the floor under the tree to begin filling with presents, and then when no one was around, I would dive in. When I had found one of mine, I groped it like a finicky shopper massages a cantaloupe. I'd feel for corners, I'd listen for rattling parts, I'd judge their weight in my hands. I'd search for any odd sounds and shapes with the intensive scrutiny of a crime scene investigator. Books and puzzles were no-brainers, but I got so good that I could tell the shuffle-shuffle-slide of a sweater from the shifting swish of a shirt.

Who can blame us present-shakers? What kid isn't brimming with excitement and anticipation at this time of year? I can remember sitting on my living room floor in spring, flipping through the pages of the J.C. Penney catalog, circling all the toys I hoped to get at Christmas. Almost a year's worth of waiting culminated at this time of year. Can you blame a kid for wanting to get a little head start on the joy?

Of course, now that I'm an adult, I look forward to this time of year because it means experiencing a different kind of joy: the joy of Christ's birth, which brings with it hope and love and the promise of new life. I realize now that Christ is greater than any gift I could find in the toy section of the Penney's catalog. But I still shake my presents.

My pastor friend David Shirey said his children also like to engage in present-shaking and catalog-perusing, and he called this behavior "running your fingers through the prospect of promises fulfilled." The prospect of promises fulfilled. The expectation that what you hope for will indeed happen. As David says, to be expecting is truly one of the blessings of Advent.

If that is so, then Mary is indeed blessed, as her relative Elizabeth says. This story in Luke takes place right after the angel announces Mary's divine pregnancy and Mary's world is turned upside down. She rushes off to be with her relative Elizabeth, who has also found out that despite her old age, she is expecting a baby who will grow up to be John the Baptist.

So here's the scene: an older woman beyond child-bearing years who is enduring a risky pregnancy that could threaten her life and the life of her child, and a younger woman facing harsh social criticism and banishment for being unwed and pregnant. This is not a casual visit between two women in happy circumstances. This scene is ripe for tense words of desperation and anguish.

And yet, we hear, "Blessed are you among women!" "When I heard you the baby in my womb leaped for joy." "My soul glorifies the Lord." Those are hardly the words of two women facing such anxious unknown futures, not to mention swollen ankles and morning sickness. Why are these women so happy?

I would submit to you that it is because of the prospect of promises fulfilled. As Elizabeth says, "Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!" They were in the midst of what Dr. Virginia Hoch called a "stable

time.” That doesn’t mean “stable” in the sense of steady or constant or secure. Mary and Elizabeth’s situation was far from stable in that sense. But what Dr. Hoch meant by “stable time” was a time when we can glimpse God breaking into our world, as God does at the stable in Bethlehem. Mary and Elizabeth, as they met to share their divine secrets, were experiencing a “stable time.”

God had come to them and worked a miracle in their lives, and they were simply overwhelmed with the joy of the moment. In ancient times, a relationship with God was not a casual affair. God was not seen as a buddy or a friend. Rather, being in relationship with God was an honor, and it called for a deep sense of respect, much like a person might respond to hosting a famous dignitary. In a sense, both Mary and Elizabeth were hosting God’s presence within them.

This fact so overwhelmed Mary that she bursts into song. That’s a fairly common occurrence at this time of year. I’m sure we could all name a favorite Christmas song without much trouble. Molly has started requesting a Christmas song each night at bedtime. Of course, it’s “Jingle Bells,” because she likes doing the “ha ha ha!” after “laughing all the way.” As a church, we’ve done a lot of singing so far this Advent, and there’s still a lot more to go before this day is over! Singing praises is a natural response to what God does at Christmas time.

Mary’s song is what we have come to know as the “Magnificat.” Her song details God’s grace and mercy to her, and the promises God has made through the prophets. In fact, almost every word in Mary’s song is a biblical quotation from the Old Testament, which Mary would have heard read her whole life. Her song echoes the prophets with its theme of redemption, freedom, and justice.

I want you to notice something interesting about the Magnificat. She starts off in the present tense – “My soul magnifies the Lord” – but quickly shifts to the past tense – “He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty.” These past-tense promises Mary sings about were believed to be fulfilled with the coming of the Messiah, who had yet to be born. What Mary is doing is singing about these promises in the past tense as if they have already happened. She’s running her fingers through the prospect of promises fulfilled.

The book of Hebrews tell us that faith is “assurance of things hoped for,” and Mary is expressing her assurance in one simple fact: God will do what he says. It would have been easy for Mary to doubt this. In many ways, her situation was one of the last places you’d expect God to show up. An impoverished land, a backwater village, a run-down stable, a teenage mother, a poor child’s birth. You can’t put that on a Christmas card, but that’s what it was. And yet, as Mary says, “the Mighty One has done great things for me.” In the midst of all her struggle, she celebrates, she sings.

We can learn from Mary’s sense of trust and faith, but it’s especially comforting for those who find Christmas to be less than a joyous time of year. Because this is a festive season, if you are anything other than bubbling with Christmas cheer, you may think there’s something wrong with you. “I shouldn’t feel this way; it’s Christmas!” But for some of us, the reality is that this is the first Christmas without a loved one who died, or this Christmas is a reminder of the struggle to buy even a few presents, or it marks the ending of another year of spinning your wheels or enduring small failures that continually add up. Elvis is not the only one who knows what it’s like to have a blue Christmas.

What Luke's story tells us is this: God knows your pain and hears your struggles. You are not alone if this Christmas is less than a merry one. There is no stable, no place in our world or in our lives that is too poor, too remote, too embarrassing, too painful, too messy, that God cannot be found at work there creating, bringing forth new life.

If you wonder how God can be present to you as you struggle with your pain, look at the characters of the Christmas story: an older woman who had given up hope of having a child; a young woman, unmarried and pregnant; the socially outcast shepherds who are the first invited to see the Christ child. Christ's coming is not a pie-in-the-sky promise that all will be well; it's a very real promise that God is in all things, working to bring about his purposes.

Mary and Elizabeth believed that God was with them. Their faith allowed them to see that God had not abandoned them to their troubles but was working in them and through them to bring new life. They believe that, in spite of the potential despair of the circumstances, God is at work and that this is part of the plan. Do they understand it? No. But they believe it. Running their fingers through the prospect of promises fulfilled. Assurance in things hoped for.

As we continue to try and make sense of our unstable world, I pray that we are blessed to experience some stable time this Christmas, time when we can glimpse God breaking through into this world, reminding us again of the promises he has made to us, whispering once again through a baby's cooing, "I will do what I say." May the hopes and fears of all the years be met in him tonight. Merry Christmas!